

burial

Deliberate disposition of the human dead, generally referred to as burial, is practiced in virtually all cultures. Methods vary widely, but the most common form of burial is interment. Deliberate interment, also called inhumation, dates from at least 50,000 years ago, and evidence exists that some NEANDERTHALERS prepared graves for their dead. Another mode of burial is entombment in natural caves or rock-cut chambers, in specially prepared underground areas such as the CATACOMBS, or in buildings constructed to house the dead as in the MASTABAS and PYRAMIDS of the ancient Egyptians and the Mausoleum of HALICARNASSUS.

The rapid oxidation of the body to ash, called CREMATION, although technically not a form of burial, is often followed by containment of the ashes in a burial urn. In the platform burial of the Plains Indians the dead were exposed to the sun, air, and predators from the sky to hasten the decomposition of the flesh, after which the bones were collected and preserved in a safe place. Platform burial is also practiced by primitive societies in Indonesia, Melanesia, and Australia.

The consignment of a body to deep waters is an infrequently used form of burial. Other unusual burial procedures dependent upon specific climatic or physical conditions are burial in permafrost, which preserves the body by freezing, and burial in tannin-rich soil conditions, which also naturally preserves the body.

Graves are usually rectangular in shape and designed to accommodate only one person. Both individual and communal prehistoric burials have been found, but in historic times mass burial has rarely been practiced except in the case of natural disasters, pestilence, or mass killing during time of war.

Bodies are usually buried in a supine, extended position, encased in a casket, sometimes with an outer enclosure, or vault. At Paleolithic sites, crouched burials are common, with the skeleton bent at the knees and the hip joints.

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Bibliography: Bendann, E., *Death Customs: An Analytical Study of Burial Rites* (1930; repr. 1971); Curl, J. S., *A Celebration of Death* (1980); Turner, Ann W., *Houses for the Dead: Burial Customs through the Ages* (1976).

See also: FUNERAL CUSTOMS; TOMB.

WAKE is the custom of watching over a dead person before burial. In many countries, the custom is rarely observed today. But some form of the custom has been practiced in all parts of the world. In the traditional wake, family and friends gathered at the dead person's home. The custom probably began because people believed that evil spirits might possess an unburied corpse if it were left alone. Wbk PC

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